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## THE CASE FOR MUNICIPAL OWNERSHIP.

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For the first time in our history America is face to face with a struggle for democracy—political, industrial, social. The issue is most clearly expressed in our cities. It is coming to the front in a number of commonwealths. It is severing party ties and forecasting a new political alignment. The new democracy is laying its foundations for a permanent home. It is adopting measures for the permanence of its control. These measures are direct legislation through the initiative and referendum, direct primaries, and municipal home rule. These are the political agencies sought.

Municipal ownership is but an industrial expression of democracy.

And the question is not so much, Do we believe in municipal ownership? The question is: Do we believe in democracy? Do we really want a government of the people, with all of its possibilities of good and evil? A government gradually broadening the significance of liberty, beyond the purely personal relations of the early Bills of Rights? And in passing on the achievements of democracy, it is necessary to bear in mind that we nowhere have a representative government. Democracy enjoys only so much liberty as privilege permits to it. Its ideals enter legislation only in so far as those ideals do not conflict with big business. Democracy has been drugged by business interests which are constantly struggling for its control. Even in those cities where the greatest achievements have been made, the community has been divided like an armed camp, and its energy devoted to self-protection rather than to the accomplishment of a definite program.

The question, Does municipal ownership pay? is least of all a financial one. No other agency of government is subjected to a purely commercial test. The motive of our police,

fire, health, street, park, school, and library departments is one of safety, convenience, comfort, happiness. Even the annual deficit in the postal department is willingly borne, because the social service is so great. The real test of municipal ownership is not a monetary one; not the relief of taxation; not a profit or loss account; not even cheap water, gas or electricity. It is rather one of higher civic life.

But measured by the taxpayer's standard, municipal ownership pays. It pays in water; it pays in electric lighting; it pays in municipal markets and docks. Even Cincinnati has made a splendid financial success out of the Cincinnati Southern Railroad. And this success has been achieved in the face of the fact that our cities are governed by the big privileged interests, the poison of whose interference extends even to those departments in which they have no direct pecuniary interest. And there is no demand, no movement, in any of our cities, for a return to private ownership. The water, electricity, and gas enterprises are as sacredly held as are the schools, the parks, the police, and fire departments. This at least is the democratic test of success or failure.

Here and there the reports of experts may show inadequate provision for depreciation, no payment for taxes and the prevalence of the spoils system. This is particularly true of electric lighting. But it must be remembered that the electric lighting plants of Detroit, Chicago, and Allegheny have been denied the right to sell light, current and power for commercial use. They are limited to public lighting; they are denied the most profitable source of revenue. Even in the face of this fact it is claimed that the total saving of the city of Detroit, including lost taxes, was \$1,183,813 in ten years time, through the public ownership of the electric lighting plant. The system was opened by Mayor Pingree in 1895. At the lowest bid then obtainable from a private company, on a ten-year contract, Detroit would have had to pay for lighting \$2,533,538. During this period the total outlay on the public plant has been but \$1,299,725, which includes a sum of \$239,729 for depreciation. The average cost of operation for ten years has been but \$43 per arc lamp, and the average total cost

has been \$65, against \$102, which was the best price obtainable from a private company. Last year the operating cost was reduced to \$35 per arc lamp, while the total cost, including all charges, was something less than \$60.

The evidence of municipal water plants is much more conclusive. A cursory examination seems to show that municipal ownership has justified itself here, even on the commercial side.

The city of Chicago has a water plant whose capital cost is \$37,436,010. The plant could be duplicated to-day for \$25,000,000. Its outstanding indebtedness is but \$4,062,107. The net profit in physical property is approximately \$21,000,000. In 1904 the gross earnings were \$4,171,194, and the operating expenses \$1,736,846. The gross profits amounted to \$2,434,348. Deducting \$164,727, the interest paid out of earnings, the net profit for the year amounted to \$2,269,621.

The present structural value of the Cleveland Water Works is \$9,900,000. The indebtedness of the plant is but \$4,200,000. The net assets belonging to the city, in excess of the obligations, is therefore \$5,700,000. The gross earnings in 1904 were \$792,412. The operating expenses in the same year were \$349,239. This includes a large sum for maintenance. The interest charges paid out of earnings were \$154,595. The net earnings in excess of all charges were, therefore, \$288,578. In addition to this, the city supplies free water for fire and police purposes, for flushing and cleaning the streets, for the public schools, and for all other agencies whose value is approximately \$250,000 more.

The Detroit Water Works are valued at \$7,836,601. Against this is a bonded debt of but \$1,155,000. The net value over and above all liabilities is \$6,681,601. The operating receipts for 1905 were \$589,955, and the operating expenses but \$170,131. The net earnings in excess of operating expenses and interest were \$359,884.

The statistics of the Boston plant are more difficult to ascertain, as the city only owns its distributing system. The source of supply is controlled by the Metropolitan Water Board. But the bonded indebtedness against the Boston plant is exactly one-half its capital cost and the operating profits within

the city in 1904 were slightly in excess of \$2,000,000. This sum was almost equivalent to the state assessment and the interest charges to be paid out of earnings.

The water system of New York has been valued at \$125,000,000. In 1903 there was an indebtedness against the plant of \$77,000,000. The cost of operation, of maintenance and interest charges was \$5,200,000, which is the total cost of the water supply of the Metropolis. The annual income is approximately \$9,000,000, and the difference, amounting to \$3,800,000, is the net profit to the city from operation. The net assets owned by the city, in excess of the indebtedness, are \$48,000,000. According to the statement of Robert G. Monroe, the Commissioner of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity under the Low Administration: "Had the water supply been in private hands, financed upon parallel lines, and similar business methods followed to those pursued by the private lighting monopoly, the citizen of New York would be paying between eighteen and twenty millions yearly for water, instead of between five and five and a half millions, the annual cost under public ownership."<sup>1</sup>

Almost every large water plant in America offers indisputable evidence of financial success; and the same is generally true of the smaller ones. As a rule, the public plants are constructed with more permanence than are the private ones. Their engineering talent has been of a good order and provision for the future has been anticipated. Private plants, on the other hand, menaced as they are by short franchises or municipal purchase, have been unable or unwilling to meet the financial burdens incident to securing a pure and adequate supply. The magnificent plants of Boston, New York, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Chicago, which have been largely constructed out of earnings, and which have been projected during an era of very general municipal incompetence, form a standing protest against the suggested incapacity of municipal enterprises. Of the plants in smaller towns, the same is true. Their capital expenditure has been heavy

<sup>1</sup> *Light and Water Service of New York*, The International Quarterly, October, 1905.

and the administration has been responsive to the demands of the sanitary authorities. Many of them have introduced artificial filtration systems, and have stamped out typhoid fever and similar diseases which are traceable to impure water.

A similar showing might be made of markets and of docks. One of the most striking examples of financial advantage is the Cincinnati Southern Railway. It was constructed at a cost of \$18,000,000. Its present physical value is very much more, and is said to be close to \$25,000,000. It is leased on a basis which will return it to the city free of debt in little more than a generation.

But I do not care to dwell on the financial side of public ownership, satisfactory as the exhibit seems to be. Experts may quarrel over these figures, for they are taken from official sources. But it is self-government, not dividends; political morality, not cheap service; a responsive and responsible city administration, not relief from taxation, that is involved.

At last we are coming to shift the blame for the corruption of our cities. Heretofore it has been attributed to democracy; to the spoils system; to the indifference, if not the corruption, of the voter. We have been satisfied with the surface phenomena. We have treated our failures as the failures of democracy. But we do not have a democratic government. What we really have in our large cities is a business-men's government, and a business-men's government rooted in privilege. Privilege has always been a source of corruption. Either the privilege of unjust taxation, or the privilege of monopoly, will account for nine-tenths of the corruption in city, county, and nation during the last generation. The principal agencies in our cities are the franchise corporations. The cause of their activity is a desire for monopoly uncontrolled by law. Their privileges are secured through a bargain with the city or the state. This bargain is maintained through a partnership with the party. To maintain the fruits of monopoly is the object of their effort. In Republican states and cities the alliance is with the Republican party. In Democratic states and cities the alliance is with the Democratic party. In most states and cities privilege is bipartisan. It

employs both parties. In city after city the boss is but the agent of some one of the public service corporations. Through this agency the big privileged interests nominate councilmen, tax assessors and taxing officials. The thing that is known as the system is the offspring of these interests, united as they are with the party organization. The boss has become the business agent of privilege. This is true of Murphy in New York, of Durham in Philadelphia, of Cox in Cincinnati, of Butler in St. Louis, of the Flinn-McGee combination in Pittsburgh. The millionaire boss has arisen, not through petty graft, nor through the spoils system, not even through contracts with the city. His political dominion, as well as his wealth has come through an alliance with big business in the form of franchises and tax evasions.

The struggle for franchise grants is the underlying issue in every election in New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Toledo, Chicago, St. Louis, Denver, and in every other large city that I know. It is disguised under party names, it is skillfully made to assume misleading issues. But the real motive is a business one, and the business interests are grouped about the franchise companies.

No satisfactory data are available for determining the value of such franchises. Here and there incomplete semi-official investigations have been made. From these investigations it appears that the value of such privileges is almost fabulous. The franchises of New York are estimated to be worth \$450,000,000. In 1903 they were appraised for taxation at \$235,184,325. In the city of Toledo, Ohio, \$23,000,000 of stock and bonds were issued upon a street railway system whose physical value was not in excess of \$5,000,000 and whose franchises begin to expire in 1910. Some years ago the value of the physical property of the seven traction companies in the city of Chicago was appraised at \$44,932,011. The then market-value of the securities issued upon these franchises, a considerable portion of which have already expired, many of which are in litigation, and all of which are under danger of condemnation by the city, amounted to \$120,235,539. Mr. Clarence Darrow has estimated the value of the

stocks and bonds upon the street railways of the city alone, at \$150,000,000, measured by the rate of dividends, and the total amount of the tangible property at very much less than \$35,000,000.<sup>2</sup> The franchises of the traction companies alone, therefore, are worth in excess of \$115,000,000. This is more than three times the total bonded indebtedness of the city. It is this treasure that the city is fighting for, and has been, for ten years.

It is these privileges that men gamble for. The cards are the parties, the winnings are franchises, and the stakes which are played are our institutions. It is this that invites corruption. The power of Tammany Hall comes almost exclusively from the public service corporations. They are the real enemies of reform. The same is true of Philadelphia, as it is of almost every large city in the country. The means employed are bribery, party tyranny, campaign contributions, and public sentiment, as made by the agencies controlled by privileged interests. Even the tax evasions are of imperial proportions. Prior to the passage of the Ford Franchise Bill they amounted to over \$3,000,000 a year in New York City alone. But the evil influence of privilege is not confined to the city. It extends to the state at large. It is necessary to control the assembly in order to prevent adverse legislation, to control taxation, to prevent municipal ownership. This necessitates constant interference in state affairs. In many states it has involved the election to the United States Senate of discredited men. From this point of vantage, privilege is able to make use of the party machinery, and through federal patronage to control the primaries and conventions. Thus it is that the entire system of government is corrupted. For as the big business interests are driven out of the city, they retreat to the state, and from the state ascend to the Capital at Washington.

But positive corruption is not all. This is but a fraction of the price we pay. The unseen influences are equally bad. The persistence of party allegiance is largely traceable to the

<sup>2</sup> *The Chicago Traction Question*, International Quarterly, October, 1905.



voice of privilege, which, controlling the press and the agencies of expression, make use of obsolete party claims for the obstruction of independent voting. Independence in local affairs would be easy of achievement were it not for the campaign contributions and class spirit, which are involved wherever franchise interests are at stake.

It is this fact that deprives reform of the best talent of the community. Interwoven as privilege is with banking and business interests, with the bench and the bar, the press and the pulpit, city administration is bereft of those most competent to carry it on. Democracy is deprived of its natural leaders. For the stockholder, the banker, the lawyer, and the well-to-do classes generally find their patriotism and their pocket at war. In consequence it is almost impossible to enlist these classes in any reform movement.

The extent to which this is true was seen in the recent uprising in Philadelphia. In spite of the aroused public sentiment, the committee was forced to admit, in its humiliation, that in all the vast city of Philadelphia it was difficult to secure one first-class lawyer who would permit himself to be retained by the people.

It is this that has forced democracy to find its leaders among men whose previous training is adequate for the large issues of municipal administration. And we cannot reclaim to public affairs the better-to-do class until we unite its purse with its civic interest. We cannot hope for good government while the prizes of life are to be gained in antagonism to good government. Reform is not retarded by the unwillingness of democracy to accept it; it is palsied by the alienation of those best fitted to serve the community. I am convinced that thousands of men would gladly serve their city were their talents free from allegiance with private interests.

Such service can only be secured through a change in our attitude of mind. The program of bettering politics by bettering men is only possible when the desire for commercial gain and the fear of social ostracism is lifted from men's minds. And this can be most readily achieved through municipal ownership.

Public control of private monopoly is the only alternative to public ownership. Competition has everywhere failed, and of necessity will continue to fail. It inevitably results in combination. Under a policy of regulation, the power must be lodged either with the city or the state, with the town council or in a supervisory commission. Both policies have already been extensively tried. For years our cities have endeavored to correct the abuses of excessive charges and indifferent service. It is this that produces corruption. It is not only the desire for franchises; it is the necessity of being free from interference that keeps the franchise corporation in politics even after a franchise has been secured. Tax officials must be controlled, aldermen, directors of public works, and mayors must be restrained. There are constant extensions to be obtained, together with permits for street openings, while bad service must not be interfered with. It is the policy of regulation that explains the persistent influence of franchise interests in local politics.

But even were this not true, regulation is practically impossible. The award of a commission, the decision of the council, is but the beginning of a contest. It is then transferred from the city to the courts, with all their vexatious delays. Litigation may be prolonged for years, and the probability is strong that the attempted regulation will be found to be unconstitutional. In the city of Cleveland a controversy with the street railway company was thus prolonged for years. The city now has a half-dozen cases in the courts. In Detroit, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis efforts to reduce street railway fares was carried into the federal courts, and their determination long delayed. In each one of these instances the courts decided that the regulation was in violation of some vested right or privilege.

The alternative of state, as opposed to municipal regulation, has been tried in Massachusetts. A similar law was recently passed in New York. Such measures but shift the controversy from the city to the state, from the council to the legislature. In the choice of members of the commission the franchise interests always manage to make their voices heard. In

commenting upon the law of the latter state creating the gas and electric commission, the Citizens' Union of New York City said:

"Moreover the commission is likely in years to come to prove merely political, and will probably become a safeguard to the corporation rather than a protection to the public."

A score of states have vainly attempted to regulate the railways. The opponents of federal railway control are to-day pointing to the failures of such attempts, as well as of the Interstate Commerce Commission, as a reason why further regulation is futile. For twenty years regulation by city, state, and nation has been attempted with such a general confession of failure that in any other matter we would be ready to admit its futility.

As a matter of fact, regulation is impossible. It involves dual control. The community is ignorant of the company's conditions, and has no means of enforcing its authority. The conflict of interest is so great that the most insignificant demands are only conceded after an exhausting contest. Moreover, only by experiment can the city determine what can be done. And monopoly dares not experiment. Monopoly is always indolent. It is always unwilling to move. Its stock-jobbing interests have become superior to its industrial functions. For this reason it cannot permit any public regulation or experiment of its own volition, because of the fear of disturbing the value of its securities, which have become the best of banking collateral. It is this fact more than any other that explains the reactionary attitude of monopoly interests. Their industrial functions have become subordinate to their stock-jobbing possibilities.

Even in Great Britain, where the street railway, gas, electric lighting, and telephone undertakings are subject to a supervision which is most careful and exacting, regulation has been abandoned for ownership. Parliament has protected the public in every way. Rates of fare, prices for gas, and electricity have been fixed by law; the method of construction is supervised, as is the service to the community. Annual reports are required to be published, and the Board of Trade and Local

Government Board have ample powers of investigation. Even with such oversight, the tramways, electricity, and water supplies have been all but universally taken over by the cities, while 256 gas plants have been either acquired from private companies or erected by the towns. All over the United Kingdom (in the face of the most perfectly adjusted system of regulation) private ownership is being abandoned.

The alternative, with us is not public regulation or public ownership: it is unregulated private monopoly or public ownership.

As to many of these things most men will agree. The showing of public ownership in water and markets, and to a considerable extent in gas and electricity, is at least creditable. The indictment of privilege, of the franchise corporation, of big business has gone unchallenged. The condition of our cities—on the one hand, unorganized democracy on the other, the natural leaders fighting for the control of the city, oftentimes unconscious of the cause of the alignment—is a condition too universal to be questioned. And the failures of regulation, like the Blue Laws of our cities, fill the statute books of our states.

The question to be considered is, are conditions due to ignorance, indifference, and inherent defects of popular government, or are they the natural and inevitable consequences of an industrial policy? Is correction to come through better men or better institutions? Is the evil personal, or is it economic? Is relief to be found through wiser franchises and further regulation, or by the destruction of privilege, and the removal of temptation through public ownership and operation? Some of the gains of ownership are certain, some are merely conjectural. It is necessary to measure the cost as well as the gain.

There can be no question but that municipal ownership will remove the most tempting stakes from the public gaming-table. It will take the big privileges out of city politics. It will free the city from class antagonism, and relieve reform of its heaviest burden. Under municipal ownership there will be no readily organized class wanting bad government. This

union of all classes for good government is habitually ignored in the discussion of the question. But it is the biggest factor in the case. To-day the influential classes, the classes which combine the talent and the influence, the classes which control the press and public opinion, are either actively engaged in promoting bad government, or they are hostile to reform. Under municipal ownership they will be free to work for the city. The press will be ready to criticise. A contest for good government will be substituted for a contest for privilege. Under municipal ownership, unorganized democracy will be allied with intelligent leadership. And no corrupt administration could long maintain itself in office against such a coalition. To-day reform movements are conspicuously wanting in big business and professional men. There is an antagonism between their citizenship and their business. Moreover, with the franchise question removed, the so-called respectable element would be free to enter politics; free to enter the council; free to serve the city's interest; free to work for good government. We cannot possibly measure this gain. Our entire political system is poisoned by the present conflict of interest. With this conflict removed, the schism which now divides our communities will be removed, and the very motives which now ally the talent of the city with bad government will then identify it with good government.

There would still remain the private contractor and the spoils system. Many persons otherwise ready for municipal ownership are fearful of the municipal employee. Mr. Robert G. Monroe, speaking of the spoils system in New York, says:

"Neither has New York's municipal water supply proved a political menace. Surely to-day it is neither a pregnant source of official corruption nor a potent adjunct to any political machine. Under the civil service laws, municipal employees are practically less subject to political control than the employees of the average public service corporation, which is constantly compelled to make and give places to political workers."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Light and Water Service in New York*, The International Quarterly, October, 1905, page 33.

This statement will be corroborated by almost any one familiar with the average city. Is it possible for us to compare the water supply, which the city owns, with the gas and street railway system, which it does not own? We can judge for ourselves which is more active in politics; which maintains the lobby in the council chamber and at the legislature; which divides the community, and which contributes to campaign funds.

It is possible that we have shifted the emphasis in our efforts for the merit system. We have insisted that civil service reform should precede public ownership; that the spoilsmen must first be exiled before democracy can be trusted with further undertakings. As a matter of fact, the spoils system is a symptom of other conditions. It is a result and not a cause of bad government. It persists because of the abstention of the city from big enterprises. It is a result of economic causes, not of democracy.

Under public ownership the spoils system could not long remain. All classes would unite in demanding its abolition. We would not tolerate the sacrifice of our comfort and convenience from official rotation. This is the history of Civil Service Reform in the Federal Service, as well as in the police and fire departments of our cities. No administration which sought thus to perpetuate itself in office could long defy public opinion. It would be subject to hourly inspection. It would be under constant surveillance. Even with all of the big services municipalized, the public employees would not equal ten per cent of the voting population. And no administration would dare to sacrifice the convenience or safety of the public undertakings. We have seen this in New York where, even during the worst years of the Tammany régime, the railways of the Brooklyn Bridge were free from the spoilsmen. Under municipal ownership all classes would be able to protest effectively at the polls.

Nor is this all under municipal ownership. A co-ordinated administration of public affairs would be possible. Transit, water, gas, electricity and power could be supplied with a single purpose of promoting the public convenience. A

single agency would control the streets. Far-sighted construction work could be laid out. Subways could be built to serve a variety of purposes. The city's growth could be anticipated with the wisdom of a contractor erecting a building. There would then be no conflict of interests. An example of this is seen in the new King's Way, laid out by the London County Council from Southampton Row to the Strand. It was built from the bottom up. Subways for the street railways underlie the center of the street, while on either side sewers and immense conduits were built for taking care of water, gas, electricity, telephones, and other services.

But the great gain from municipal ownership is a communal one. A conscious city policy would then be possible. The problem of the slums would be open to correction, if not to cure. A far-sighted program of transit would enable the city to disperse its population into the country and provide it with rapid and easy access to work. A similar program would be possible in water, gas, electric light and power. Public convenience could be promoted through the substitution of gas and electricity for heating and power. The condition of the poor would be improved and the morals of the city generally elevated. This has been the policy of the British city. Street railway fares have been greatly reduced. They now average in the neighborhood of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  cents, and oftentimes less. Gas is sold at from 40 to 70 cents per thousand cubic feet, while electricity is furnished at a price which makes it available to all classes. By the cheapening of these services the burdens of the very poor can be relieved. And it need not be argued that transit, light, and water have become primary necessities which must be satisfied before any other activity is possible. Next to rent, they are the heaviest item in the domestic budget.

We cannot have a conscious city policy until this is done; we cannot build and plan for an organized life. To-day all our strength and talent is devoted to protection. Our cities are in a state of armed resistance. In consequence all other issues and all other matters are, of necessity, pushed into the background. Nor can we plan a city with this dual control.

We are as helpless as a builder whose elevators, plumbing, and lighting are in the hands of outside and hostile interests.

These are some of the gains. They are by-products of the greater gain which would follow from an awakened public interest. We have assumed that good government would come from little government; that the less the city undertook, the better would be its performances. We have sought to improve the personal before we corrected the economic evils. We have reversed the rules of life in the discussion of this question. In my opinion, good government will come with more government. Efficient administration and honest administration will come when the city does so much for its people that their interest and affection will be awakened thereby.

A city with big interests will invite big men to serve it. Men of talent will not accept a post which is shorn of power. And under public ownership the big men will be free to enter politics. To-day they are excluded by adverse pecuniary or class interests. They are alienated even from reform organizations. The banker and the broker, the bench and the bar, the press and the pulpit, all express a distrust of democracy, which is really a fear that their privileges will be endangered. Consider for a moment the change which would result in public opinion if the franchise corporations of New York and Chicago were in the hands of the city. From what source could corrupt funds come; from what section of the press would the machine be supported; from what class would the boss receive his approval; by whom would the party be divided? Then the press would demand honest and efficient administration with one voice; the big financial interests would throw their backing to the Citizen's Union and the Municipal Voter's League; the East Side would have as its ally Wall Street and the press. Organized class antagonism would tend to disappear, for no interests antagonistic to good government would remain, save those of the criminal class and the spoilsmen. Reform would become popular. The model charter would come in as a matter of course. The spoils system would find difficulty in surviving a single session of the legislature. Other departments of the city would be



toned up, for even the schools, the libraries, the parks, the public health and fire departments are sacrificed through the organization which is maintained for the control of the other departments of the government. This is the testimony of Great Britain. The renaissance of her local government is said to date from the big undertakings which her cities have assumed.

Municipal ownership is, therefore, not an isolated issue. It is not a question of cheaper or better service; it is a question of self-government; of government by the people rather than government by privilege. It is but a cross-section of the same contest that is being waged at Washington; that has been disclosed in state after state and city after city. It is the struggle of democracy seeking to divorce itself from a privileged class.